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THE FIRST TEACHER OF EUROPEAN MUSIC IN AMERICA

European music—the type of music that we know today—was introduced into America by the missionaries of the Catholic church. Nearly a century before the English had made a permanent settlement on the Atlantic coast, Cortes had accomplished the conquest of the valley of Mexico, and was appealing to Europe for workers to convert the natives—to save their souls for Heaven, and their territory for the Spanish king. In response to that call, the first missionaries entered North America, and took up the task of infusing the native population with the culture which Europe knew in the early sixteenth century. As music was required in the services of the church, and was soon found to exert a remarkable influence over the Indians, it became the task of the representatives of the church to develop musicians from among the natives. The pioneer in this field was he who disembarked at Vera Cruz on the thirtieth of August, 1523,—Pedro de Gante—the first teacher of European music in America.¹

Of the parentage of this pioneer, little is known; it is probable that he was a cousin of Charles V.² Born in Flanders about 1480, Pedro de Gante enjoyed the privilege of study at the University of Louvain,³ before taking the habit of a Franciscan. He was performing the duties of a lay-brother of that order at the monastery of Ghent⁴ when permission was granted, by his kinsman—the king, to take up the work of the church in America. When and where he received the musical education which was to serve as a basis for much of his later work, we are not told; but it was expected, during the fifteenth century, that a youth destined for the work of the church should become proficient in the theory of music, the art of organ playing, and in

¹ KIECKENS, F., *Los primeros misioneros Belgas en America-Fray Pedro de Gante—Recoleta flamenco—primer misionero del Anahauc.* Mexico 1523-1572.

² ICAZBALCETA, G.: *Bibliografía Mexicana del Siglo XVI*, Mexico, p. 34. IXLILXOCHITL, *Relacion Decima Tercia*, p. 386.

³ *Idem.*, p. 34.

⁴ TORQUEMADA: *Monarquía Indiana*, Tercera Parte, Lib XX, Madrid 1723 p. 428.

singing. Indeed, courses covering this ground were offered in the best universities—the professorship of theoretical and practical music at Salamanca dated from 1252.⁵ Moreover, in the monasteries the construction of musical instruments destined for the service of the church was carried on; the precentor chanter, or choir-master,—whichever he happened to be called—was expected to be able to make all necessary repairs to the organ.⁶ It seems certain that Pedro de Gante had at least observed the methods of instruments construction, although he may never have had any practice in the mechanical field.

When the call came for workers to leave the quiet retreats of the monasteries and confront the dangers of an unknown world, the lay-brother was among the first to respond. Without awaiting the sanction of the Pope, Pedro de Gante was permitted by the king to set out for New Spain,⁷ accompanied only by two brothers from the monastery of Ghent. His name does not appear in the list of the first Franciscan mission to Mexico, for the reason that he preceded that group by a year. From Vera Cruz he proceeded to the City of Mexico, where it was his original intention to locate. The unsettled conditions which still prevailed there as a result of the conquest changed his plans; instead, he established himself at Tezcoco and began the task of mastering the language of the natives.⁸

Lest any one picture the new home of Pedro de Gante as a settlement in some wilderness surrounded by savage tribes, it may be well to recall that Tezcoco was the capital of one of the former kingdoms which occupied the valley of Mexico. On the shores of a lake bearing the same name—the scene, in 1521, of the hasty building of ships destined to accomplish the overthrow of the Aztec rulers—a city of thirty thousand inhabitants evidenced the civilization doomed to destruction by the Spanish conquest. In the splendid palaces of the rulers and chiefs of the realm, in the wealth of fruit and flowers with which this most

⁵ HAWKINS, J.: *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*. Vol. I. London 1875 p. 405.

⁶ *Idem.*, p. 258.

⁷ VETANCURT: *Menologio Franciscano in Teatro Mexicano Mexico*, 1698 p. 67.

⁸ ICAZBALCETA: *op. cit.*, p. 35. Also MENDIETA, *Eclesiastica Indiana Mexico*, 1870 p. 606.

fertile valley abounded, in the snow-clad mountains encompassing, the missionary must have found both inspiration and a challenge. For beside the palace rose the heathen temple, and in Nature the Indians found their God.

The natural beauty of this Mexican valley furnishes a setting for an act unique in history. Amid such surrounding was the music which the Christian church had evolved in Europe, introduced to the Indians.* Here, at Tezcoco, for the first time in North America, the voices of the Indians mingled with those of their European teachers as the tones of the plain chant were born abroad by the breeze. Across the blue lake toward Mexico City the sounds were wafted; the white-capped mountains sent back the echo. That day, a new form of musical art was born for America—an art, which by its mysterious power, was to charm and uplift, to win the hearts and elevate the minds of those to whom it ministered. Not for long did the friars sing alone; soon hundreds of Indian voices joined in the daily song-service in honor of a God of justice, of mercy, and of love.

During the year of 1524 Pedro de Gante had sufficiently mastered the native language to open a school for the sons of the chiefs in a building placed at his disposal by Ixlilxochitl, an ally of the Spanish.⁹ It has been suggested that, as the attendance was enforced, the chiefs at first sent sons of slaves or servants, but as the advantages of the instruction became apparent the actual sons took their places.¹⁰

This year was marked by the arrival of the first Franciscan mission which consisted of twelve workers who, scattered about the valley of Mexico, soon brought that district under the sway of the church. As the conquest was extended, they went further into the interior to convert and teach the natives, and to establish churches and schools. Soon other groups of priests were in the field, and the results of their work were indisputable. For the new churches and monasteries, choirs, singers, and organists were needed. All of these demands must be met by students trained in the school of the first missionary. New-comers from

* Cortes had two priests with him, but they made no attempt to teach the Indians the chant.

⁹ ICAZBALCETA: *op. cit.* p. 35.

¹⁰ *Idem.*, pp. 37-38.

Europe were added to his staff of teachers. Early in 1527, Pedro de Gante moved the seat of his labors to Mexico City.¹¹ There, in the monastery of San Francisco, the rest of his life was spent in teaching.

The course of study at first embraced reading, writing, practical arts, singing, and playing on musical instruments.¹² The fundamental purpose of the school was, of course, to make worthy converts for the church, and to prepare the students to take a part in the development of its work. For this there was need of singers for the choirs, precenters for directors, and sacristains, in addition to the number of mechanical workers needed for the construction of chapels and monasteries. To develop all of these, the curriculum of the school was necessarily broad; but this discussion will confine itself to the development of one especial branch—music.

Before practical musical instruction was given, the Indians were taught to copy musical manuscript by practice in drawing even lines and making clear notes. It is claimed that very beautiful illuminated copies of the psalter were made in this school;¹³ it is certainly true that copies dating from the early sixteenth century are still in existence in Mexico. After a year of practice in such work, the Indian boys were introduced by Pedro de Gante to the art of ecclesiastical song. There was at first much laughing and joking; indeed, many of the boys insisted that they could never learn to sing like the Spaniards, for the voices of some were very thin and piercing in quality, and others seemed to be continually out of tune. Most of the Indian voices could not be compared with the Spanish either in sweetness or strength, nevertheless enough good voices were found and trained to supply the demands of new chapels as they were established. Cultivation seems to have done wonders in developing the native voices, for Mendieta claims that some of the singers, bass, tenor, alto, and soprano, were, in time, trained to such a high degree that they could have competed successfully with any singers selected from the cathedral choirs of Europe.¹⁴

¹¹ ICAZBALCETA: *op. cit.*, p. 36 KIECKENS: *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹² MENDIETA: *op. cit.*, p. 608; also TORQUEMADA, Tomo Tercia, p. 428.

¹³ MENDIETA: p. 411.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 411.

Among his assistants in teaching singing was an old Spanish priest, Juan Caro, who insisted on teaching in the Spanish language although the boys did not understand a word.¹⁵ He repeated the rules of singing endlessly, and showed such infinite patience that the pupils, who were at first inclined to laugh at the old man, ceased to regard him open-mouthed, and began to listen. Soon some comprehended, and then others; before long he was able to proceed with instructions for chanting. As the pupils became adept in both the plain and figured chant, they were sent out to the smaller churches as teachers for the natives. So effective was the work of such pupils that there was not a village of one hundred inhabitants which did not have singers who officiated in the mass and vespers by chanting and using reed and other musical instruments.¹⁶

The list of instruments used in the churches of Mexico during the first half century of Spanish occupation deserves attention. Flutes, flageolets, Alpine horns, guitars played with a bow, cornets, bassoons, trombones, and the kettle-drum were popular. Mendieta says¹⁷ that every instrument employed in the European church was used in the Indian chapel, not only in the cities but in the villages. On first thought it would seem that the instruments were imported, but he tells us differently. They were made by the natives, supervised by the Spanish teachers. Organs were built in the music school of Pedro de Gante as early as 1527, if we may accept the date printed on the margin of the page which bears his account of the work.¹⁸ All of the churches served by priests had organs, which were played by the natives after instruction in the school. For use outside of the church they made the rebec, guitar, harp, and monochord.

There is no doubt that the seeds of musical instruction planted by the Flemish lay-brother fell on fertile ground. The Indian delighted in music. It was one of the surest avenues of appeal to his feelings. For the success of the church, it was

¹⁵ MENDIETA: p. 412; Torquemada, V, III, p. 213. and MOTOLINIA, in *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva Espana in Col. de Doc. p. 1 Hist. de Mexico*, Tomo I. Mexico 1858 (Icazbalceta Edition) p. 210.

¹⁶ MENDIETA: *op. cit.*, p. 412. MOTOLINIA, *Memoriales de Fray Toribio de Motolinia*. (Mexico 1903.) p. 177.

¹⁷ MENDIETA: p. 412.

¹⁸ MENDIETA: see margin of page 411.

fortunate that the man who began the work of conversion saw fit to utilize the instinct for music. Indian ability did not stop at mere imitation, for Mendieta tells us¹⁹ that, only a few years after perfecting themselves in church singing, they began to compose Christmas carols in the form of four-voiced figured chants, also masses, and other works which showed their possession of undoubted inventive ability.

While the work of Pedro de Gante in establishing a music school in which so many natives were trained to the highest stage of musical culture of that day shows the remarkable character of the man, it would be unfair to fail to mention his achievements in other fields. As the result of his labor, thousands of Indian children became members of the Catholic church; and more than a hundred chapels were constructed under his supervision—among these the chapel of San José. The monastery of San Francisco and many minor schools, which were taught by his pupils, were founded by him.²⁰ He did not confine himself to the teaching of music, but instructed the natives in such practical arts as carpentering, stone masonry, and painting, for the purpose of furthering the building of schools and churches. With the help of Arnaldo de Bassacio,²¹ he taught Latin to a group of singers who were to serve the cathedral as choristers; to another group he imparted the mysteries of mixing colors for the pictures which were to adorn its walls. In 1553 his *Doctrina Cristiana* was printed on the first press brought to the New World.²²

Thus the life of Pedro de Gante was spent—responding to the unceasing calls for his help in many fields. True to his ideals, he turned his back on the lure of his native land and remained the simple lay-brother whose life was consecrated to the up-building of the Indians. Three times he declined to accept even the elevation to the priesthood, convinced as he was that he could better fulfill the duties of a teacher than a preacher. The work of the former he continued to perform until his death, in 1572, in the monastery he had founded. In its chapel he was

¹⁹ MENDIETA: *op. cit.*, p. 413.

²⁰ VETANCURT: *op. cit.* p. 67.

²¹ MENDIETA, p. 415.

²² ICAZBALCETA: *op. cit.*, p. 32.

buried. Three centuries later, in the face of the onswEEP of progress, the chapel gave way to a new street which was given the name of the Franciscan missionary. Today, in the heart of the City of Mexico, one of the arteries of commerce is known as the *Calle de Gante*. No grave remains to mark the last resting place of his bones; his chapel has yielded its place to business; a picture of him is rarely to be found;²³ and but two known copies of his published work attest his zeal and industry.²⁴

Even if his efforts in other fields must be forgotten, the pages of musical history should perpetuate his name and work. He sang the first song, based on the European scale, ever taught to Americans; he was the first teacher of music—of the plain and figured chants—the only forms of music cultivated in the schools of his day.²⁵ Under his supervision the first American organs were constructed; under his guidance the church orchestra assumed no mean proportions. Even before his death, music had become a power in the lives of the people among whom he labored. To Pedro de Gante is due, in no small measure, the development of the love of music which is a distinguishing characteristic of the Mexican to-day. No village is too poor to support a band; no Indian too uncultured to appreciate its music. Two nationally supported institutions stand today as evidence of the Mexican attitude toward music—the National Opera, housed in the finest opera house in America; and the National Conservatory of Music—the only completely equipped music school in America which opens its doors to all alike—tuition free—a fitting monument to the ideal of Pedro de Gante—the first teacher of European music in America.

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²³ ICAZBALCETA is wrong in saying that no picture is to be found; the best known is probably the painting in the National Museum in Mexico City.

²⁴ One copy was possessed by Icazbalceta, the other by Senor D. Jose Ma de Agreda.

²⁵ *Codice Franciscano*, p. 6. in *Nueva Coleccion de Doc pl. Hist. de Mexico* Mexico, 1889 Vol. II. p. 6.